WAR OF 1812 WILLOW OAK
(War of 1812 *Quercus phellos*)
NPS Witness Tree Protection Program
Oxon Cove Park & Oxon Hill Farm
Near parking lot
Oxon Hill
Prince George's County
Maryland

HALS MD-13
MD-13

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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HALS No. MD-13

Location:	Oxon Cove Park & Oxon Hill Farm, near parking lot, Oxon Hill, Prince George's County, Maryland
Owner/Manager:	U.S. Government, National Park Service
Present Use:	Ornamental and shade tree; prominent landscape element
Significance:	The War of 1812 Willow Oak (*Quercus phellos*) is significant because of its size and location. As it was likely planted in at least the early nineteenth century, the tree has stood as a living witness to a remarkable history, from the War of 1812, to the farms of Godding Croft, and finally the evolution of Oxon Hill Farm as a living history site.
Author & Discipline:	Jonathan Pliska, Landscape Architectural Historian, 2006
Project Information:	The Witness Tree Protection Program was a pilot project undertaken by the Historic American Landscapes Survey and the National Capital Region of the National Park Service. The principals involved were Richard O'Connor, Chief, Heritage Documentation Programs; Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief, Historic American Landscapes Survey; Darwina Neal, Chief, Cultural Resources, National Capital Region; Jonathan Pliska, Historian, Historic American Landscapes Survey; Jet Lowe and James Rosenthal, Photographers, Heritage Documentation Programs.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Much of the land comprising Oxon Cove Park was originally part of the 600-acre St. Elizabeths tract granted to John Charman by the Calvert family in 1662. Following his arrival in Maryland ca. 1675, the wealthy English Col. John Addison purchased this land. The Addison family enlarged the holding to 3,663 acres in 1767 and named the estate Oxon Hill Manor. In 1811, Dr. Samuel DeButts purchased a 269.75-acre potion of Oxon Hill Manor that included the central portion of present-day Oxon Cove Park. DeButts named this smaller tract Mount Welby, and property tax valuations indicate that he constructed a brick dwelling ca. 1800. This house, also known historically as Mount

Welby, still stands today. It is a modified Georgian design laid out in a rectangular, two-story, three-bay plan.[1]

During the War of 1812, DeButts and his family were English sympathizers, having lived in England prior to their 1794 emigration to the United States. Their commiseration was not well received by their fellow Americans. Financial difficulties ensued as the family could not access its English banking accounts and was forced to borrow money at high interest rates.[2] Although the harvests were plentiful, a severe lack of funds nearly forced Dr. Debutts to close down the family farm. Moreover, the estate was situated near some of the worst fighting of the entire war. In an 1815 letter to her brother, Mary, the wife of Dr. DeButts, wrote, "At the Battle of Bladensburg we heard every fire (that place being not more than 5 or 6 miles from us). Our house shook repeatedly by the firing upon forts & Bridges, & illuminated by the fires in our Capital."[3] Mount Welby's location also afforded a clear view of the city of Alexandria, Virginia, as it surrendered to Adm. Cockburn's British fleet in 1814. The property may have even come under fire, since at one point the DeButts family returned home to find that three rockets had evidently been fired at the house, but missed.[4]

The DeButts children sold the Mount Welby estate in 1843. The property passed through the hands of a series of absentee landlords and tenants until the United States purchased the land in 1891 for use by St. Elizabeths Hospital. This new property, named Godding Croft after hospital superintendent William W. Godding, was located some five miles south of St. Elizabeths' main institution. St. Elizabeths was founded in 1852 as the only national Public Health Service Hospital ever built in the United States solely devoted to the care and recovery of the mentally ill.[5] The hospital quickly moved to the forefront of the mental healthcare field as it abandoned the sequestered, custodial-care approach to treatment. Instead, it pioneered the use of congenial surroundings and a relaxing atmosphere in which patients could convalesce and learn "proper behavior."[6] Superintendent Grodding expanded this methodology through the use of hospital farms at Grodding Croft. He believed that the "harmless insane" would benefit from the fresh air and physical labor, while supplying food for the hospital. In Godding's view, the farms were "a somewhat new departure in the direction of human care and enlightened treatment, that can hardly fail to promote the comfort of those whose hands are thus occupied while their thoughts may find therein diversion for the cobwebs of their brains."[7] The Mount Welby House remained the focal point of the entire farmstead.

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[1] R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc., *Historical Resource Study – Oxon Cove Park, Oxon Hill, Maryland: Final Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1993), 19-23, 70-71.
[2] Ibid, 23.
[3] Mary DeButts to Richard Earle Welby, March 1815, *Richard J. Lundgren Family Papers*, Dover, Massachusetts, quoted in R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc., 24.
[4] Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc., 24.
[5] Ibid, 27.
[6] Ibid, 29.
[7] William W. Godding, "Government Hospital for the Insane: Annual Report 1892," typescript, 16, Oxon Cove Park files, National Capital Parks-East, Anacostia, quoted in Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc., 30.

Although the St. Elizabeths Hospital farm reports primarily documented the agricultural component of the enterprise, there is some indication that this new treatment improved the demeanor, if not the mental health, of the patients. However, it must be cautioned that only the most well-adjusted, stable patients were allowed to work on the farms in the first place.

By the mid-twentieth century, the hospital farms at Godding Croft stood out as an agrarian refuge amidst a sea of urban and suburban development. Theft and vandalism increased as workplace reductions left the farms woefully understaffed. At the same time, American mental health professionals began adopting the industrial therapy programs developed in Europe. These programs established industrial rehabilitation centers and reserved a portion of the jobs for the disabled, including the mentally ill.[8] St. Elizabeths closed Godding Croft in 1967 and leased the land to the National Park Service.

The National Park Service utilized the Mount Welby House and other existing agricultural infrastructure in creating a functional farm, which opened on 8 July 1967 as the Children's Animal Farm. Oxon Hill Farm became the first property developed by the NPS that involved living agricultural interpretation.[9] This interpretation, however, developed slowly, with early planning advocating building aesthetics over historical accuracy. Animals and hands-on farm activities were the primary attractions. By 1977, milking cows and shelling corn gave way to an increased educational initiative designed to promote the park as a living history farm. Pre-site and post-site teaching packets were available for teachers who brought school groups to Oxon Hill Farm. At the farm, interpreters instructed the children on the animals' names, incubation and gestation periods, litter sizes, diets, care and feeding, as well as the products derived from each. Lessons on crop cultivation, agricultural machinery, and the history of Godding Croft were also taught. By 1990, the managers of Oxon Hill Farm had further embraced the historical aspect of the site and began plans to screen off maintenance areas, parking lots, and other modern sections of the site, as well as install period landscaping.[10] In 2005, Oxon Cove Park's interpretative mission was again expanded, this time to tell the story of Jacob Shaw, a slave who lived onsite and fled to Washington, D.C., via the Underground Railroad in 1840. That same year, Oxon Cove Park became part of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, and Mount Welby House opened and exhibition on the people who lived and worked in the structure, including seventeen African American slaves.[11] Today, this interpretation has expanded still further, and includes the documentation and interpretation of the landscape itself.

One prominent landscape element that has heretofore been largely overlooked is a large, venerable willow oak tree located near the parking lot for the Oxon Hill Farm. This tree,

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[8] Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc., 37, 39.
[9] Ibid, 41.
[10] Ibid, 41-47.
[11] National Park Service, *Oxon CovePark/Oxon Hill Farm* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, National Capital Parks-East, 2 November 2007), http://www.nps.gov/oxhi/index.htm (accessed 12 December 2007).

here identified as the War of 1812 Willow Oak, likely dates to at least the early nineteenth century. As such, it has stood as a living witness to a remarkable history, from the hardships suffered by the Debutts family during the War of 1812, to the farms of Godding Croft, and finally the evolution of Oxon Hill Farm as a living history site. Given the recent expansion of interpretative themes at the farm, this remarkable tree deserves to be recognized and celebrated as a principal element of the rich cultural landscape present at Oxon Cove Park.

PART II. BIOLOGICAL INFORMATION

Quercus phellos, commonly known as willow oak,[12] is native to North America with a geographic range from New York to Florida and west to Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas.[13] The genus name, *Quercus*, is Latin for oak and the species name, *phellos*, is the ancient Greek word for cork. It is one of approximately 450 deciduous tree species classified under the genus *Quercus* within the oak family Fagaceae.[14] The species' bark and leaves most easily identify willow oak specimens. When very young, the bark is light red in color, but darkens to gray with age and becomes roughened by irregular furrows and ridges.[15] Unlike most oaks, the leaves are shaped like willow leaves and are described by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture as "simple, alternate, deciduous, elongated and slender, with smooth edges; they are light green and shiny above, dull and paler below with distinct [pinnate] venation."[16] In autumn they turn yellow, bronze-orange, yellow-brown, and russet-red before falling in the winter.[17] Flowers take the form of catkins, compact and often droopy forms quite different from the open petal types produced by many other species. Because they require airflow for wind pollination, the catkins bloom from February to May, approximately one week before the leaf buds appear. The species is monoecious; both male and female catkins appear on each willow oak tree. Staminate (male) flowers encased in slender, yellow-green, and hairy catkins, while pistillate (female) flowers are tiny and grow in clusters at stem junctions.[18] As with all oaks,

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[12] This species is also known as peach oak, pin oak, and swamp chestnut oak. See Bryce E. Schlaegel, "Willow Oak," in *Silvics of North America: 2. Hardwoods. Agricultural Handbook 654*, online ed., tech. coords. Russell M. Burns and Barbara H. Honkala (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, 1990), 1378, http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/silvics_manual/volume_2/silvics_v2.pdf (accessed 12 June 2006).

[13] Michael A. Dirr, *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants: Their Identification, Ornamental Characteristics, Culture, Propagation and Uses*, 5th ed. (Champaign, Ill.: Stipes Publishing L.L.C., 1998), 831.

[14] Liberty Hyde Bailey and Ethyl Hyde Bailey, "*Quercus*," in *Hortus Third: A Concise Dictionary of Plants Cultivated in the United States and Canada*, revised and expanded by the staff of the Liberty Hyde Bailey Hortorium, Cornell University (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 933.

[15] Dirr, 830.

[16] U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Plant Materials Program, "Plant Fact Sheet: Pin Oak, *Quercus phellos*," in *PLANTS Database* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Plant Data Center, 5 February 2002), http://plants.nrcs.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_pode3.pdf (accessed 23 June 2006).

[17] Dirr, 831.

[18] Schlaegel, 1381; Liberty Hyde Bailey and Ethyl Hyde Bailey, "Monoecious," in *Hortus Third: A Concise Dictionary of Plants Cultivated in the United States and Canada*, revised and expanded by the staff of the

Quercus phellos produces acorns. These seeds, measuring ½" or less long and wide, can be differentiated from those of other species' by their alternating brown and blackish bands.[19]

Although the precise age of the War of 1812 *Quercus phellos* is unknown, NPS staff members at the Oxon Cove Park and Oxon Hill Farm believe it dates to at least the 1811 DeButts land purchase, fixing the specimen's age at around 200 years, possibly more.[20] The typical lifespan for members of the species is typically 150-200 years, with several prominent individual trees living past 300 years of age.[21] The War of 1812 Willow Oak has therefore reached or eclipsed the average life expectancy for the species. Additionally, mature willow oaks normally range in size from 40' to 60' tall, with a 30' to 40' crown spread and 110" to 228" trunk circumference.[22] Detailed measurements have not been conducted on the War of 1812 *Quercus phellos*, but the tree appears to be in the upper end of this range.

Quercus phellos is an extremely vigorous species that exhibits no serious susceptibility to pests or diseases and is suited to a variety of environmental conditions. The trees accept clay, sand, and loam soils that are inundated by frequent floods or generally well-drained. They are highly drought tolerant, but grow best in mildly acidic soil that remains moist even when precipitation is scarce. Willow oaks also adjust well to an urban environment since they are largely unaffected by elevated ozone levels or the presence of aerosol salts frequently used to melt ice and aid drivers in the winter months. Roads and foundations do not significantly impact their root systems, and consequently *Quercus phellos* is an excellent candidate for plantings along city streets and in small lawns, parking lot islands, or highway medians.[23] Given this adaptability to a wide variety of environmental factors, the War of 1812 *Quercus phellos* has been well-suited to the changing functions of its surrounding landscape throughout the past two centuries.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Hortorium, Cornell University (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 1218.

[19] Dirr, 831.

[20] The typical minimum lifespan of a willow oak is 150 years. See Jeffery L. Reimer and Walter Mark, "*Quercus phellos*: Willow Oak," in *SelecTree: A Tree Selection Guide* (San Luis Obispo, Calif.: Urban Forest Ecosystems Institute, 2004), California Polytechnic State University, http://selectree.calpoly.edu (accessed 21 June 2006).

[21] Anantha M. Prasad and Louis R. Iverson, "Life History and Disturbance Response of *Quercus phellos*, Willow Oak," in *A Climate Change Atlas for 80 Forest Tree Species of the Eastern United States* (Delaware, Ohio: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, Northwestern Research Station, 30 January 2002), http://www.fs.fed.us/ne/delaware/atlas/lh831.htm (accessed 17 July 2006).

[22] Dirr, 830; Moore.

[23] Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson, Quercus phellos: *Willow Oak*, (Gainsville, Fla.: University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, November 1993), http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ST592 (accessed 12 June 2006).